

Good evening esteemed Members of the Appropriations committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the Governor's budget for the Department of Correction. My name is Camryn Kessler and I am the Senior Development Manager of the Katal Center for Equity, Health, and Justice, and a student at the UConn School of Social Work.

There is a mental health crisis in the prisons in Connecticut. The percent of those incarcerated who need a high level of mental health care is over 30%, the highest it has ever been in the state, and yet nothing is being done to address this.

While Connecticut continues to close prisons, with Radgowski and Northern closing in 2021 and Willard closing this April, we continue to raise the budget of personal services, even though fewer employees are needed. The closing of Willard alone will save the state \$6.5 million a year.

None of these savings, however, are going into mental healthcare, or healthcare at all. While personal services are being raised \$7 million in this budget, Medical Services *overall* are being raised less than a million.

I'm aware that a bill has been proposed in the Judiciary Committee to use money from the General Fund to invest in mental healthcare for incarcerated people, but in light of the surplus that closing Willard will create, the legislature should instead directly reinvest these excess funds from closing these prisons into mental healthcare.

That money from the general fund (which currently exceeds \$3 billion) can then be used in mental health services in our community. Many people with mental health diagnoses find themselves incarcerated due to lack of supportive services in their community. When communities do not have the resources to treat mental health crises in their members and these mental illnesses go untreated, the people affected by mental illness often have nowhere else to turn. Additionally, in our communities, police are often called on individuals experiencing mental health crises, which leads to escalation of problems, and higher rates of incarceration for those individuals in distress. Additional mental health services would be an asset to the six cities that are disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration in the state. Bridgeport; Hartford; New Britain; New Haven; New London; and Waterbury make up 17% of the state's total population but more than half of the state's *incarcerated* population. Thus, providing broad community mental health services in these towns will lead to a decrease in the rates of people being incarcerated for untreated mental illness in the state overall.

To truly address the mental health needs of incarcerated people, we need to be treating the mental health of people who are currently incarcerated, but also to have a broad access to mental health services in our community to decrease the rates of incarceration of those with mental health needs to begin with.

The appropriations committee can make the first step here: please reinvest the savings from closing Willard into mental health services for currently incarcerated people. Thank you for your time.